

THE ALPS ON ADRENALINE

THRILL-SEEKERS, OUTDOOR
JUNKIES AND NATURE-LOVERS
HAVE BEEN DRAWN TO INTERLAKEN
FOR MORE THAN A CENTURY.
DIANA HUBBELL LOOKS INTO THIS
ALPINE LAND'S ENIGMATIC ALLURE.



Paragliding
above Interlaken.





‘HOW WILL I KNOW WHEN TO JUMP?’ I ASK, TRYING TO SOUND BRAVER THAN I FEEL.

“You don’t jump, you sit,” Werner, my guide and lifeline for the day says in his thick Swiss-German accent. He has a grizzled, sun-scorched face and wisps of hair bleached blonde from so much time aloft. This is a man who has been paragliding his whole life, who has made that fateful leap more than 5,000 times. On his days off, he stows his parachute in a backpack, straps on crampons and scales the higher slopes solo to jump from where most don’t dare venture.

Yet, as I watch him methodically arranging our rainbow-hued chute I feel my stomach twist. The grass drops off sharply just steps from where we stand and beyond it is the valley with its twin glassy lakes, green meadows and red-roofed houses a thousand meters below. Towering over all of this are the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau.

The Ogre, the Monk and the Virgin. Sheer rock faces capped with solid gleaming blue ice, they are as foreboding as they are beautiful. It is easy to see how they inspired poetic names and how they have become an obsession for so many. The 1,800-meter north face of Eiger, the highest on the Continent, is one of the greatest climbing challenges in the world. Nicknamed Mordwand, or “Murder Wall,” it has claimed more than 64 lives since the foolish and the fearless began attempting to scale its slopes in 1935. The final stretch is a web of deadly crevasses and unstable chasms ominously known as “The White Spider.”

In spite of the danger, or perhaps because of it, people continue to come. Like local legend Takio Kato, the first person to lead a team up the north face’s most difficult, direct route in 1969; like Ueli Steck, who first free-climbed it alone in 2008; or Dani Arnold who then broke Steck’s speed record in 2011 by clamoring up in two hours and 28 minutes, at times sprinting through the freezing, thin oxygen.

These mountains were what drew me here, just as they attracted wealthy Victorians to the area more than a century ago. They’re the



Natural beauty is around every corner when hiking. **Opposite:** At lower levels, summer colors abound.

FLORA AND FAUNA GIVE

reason for Europe's highest railroad and the graceful colonial-style hotels dotting the landscape. Without these haunting, hostile, geological obelisks the town of Interlaken would be nothing but a speck on the map. Without them, I wouldn't be standing here, heart in my throat, waiting to rush into the void.

"Are you worried?" Werner asks with a devilish grin. "Don't be. You're flying *luxus*—first class all the way, baby. A couple weeks ago, I went paragliding from there." He points to the sharp, white point of Jungfrau, 4,158 meters above sea level.

I want to protest that my version of first class usually comes with soft pillows and free champagne, but before I can open my mouth we're racing forward. Down, down we go on the increasingly vertiginous slope, until my legs are wheeling about like Wile E. Coyote. There is no way to go forward. Instead, I sit back.

Wind rushes into our sails and buoys us. We are weightless, floating feather light and free above it all. My *luxus* seat is a whole lot more comfortable than it looks and suddenly the experience goes from terrifying to thrilling. We plunge and swoop, diving perilously fast, then rising back up again as we catch a thermal off the side of an intimidating rock face. We curve in great arcs, rushing up into the deep blue sky.

The Jungfrau was built more than a century ago, back when a train that could climb more than 2,000 meters into the heavens must have been a mechanical marvel. It took 14 years of blasting through solid granite to construct it. The rail workers spent so long in these remote alpine landscapes that they brought their families from Italy to live with them. A glimpse into the sepia-toned photographs of the era shows pale-faced, unsmiling women in oversized hats and small, serious children dwelling high above the clouds.

You'd never guess the age of the route by looking at these smartly outfitted machines though. Their bright paint jobs have a certain retro charm and they purr along with modern efficiency. Hybrid technology renders them ecologically sensible as well. Hydroelectricity from torrents of melting glacial water powers these little engines that could, and the reserved brake energy from each two trains trips is enough to power a third.



WAY TO ROCK AND SNOW

Today, these sleek, metallic workhouses ferry 5,000 visitors a day to Jungfrauoch, appropriately dubbed the Top of Europe thanks to its 3,454-meter elevation. The journey is an impossibly scenic one. As we ascend, we pass vast meadows where doe-eyed cows stare at us through long lashes. Gradually, the flora and fauna give way to barren rock and patches of snow. The 22-kilometer Aletsch Glacier glistens in the near-blinding sunlight.

On the way up, my guide Yuki Eymann regales me with tales of local icons. Most of her friends are second- or third-generation climbers, part of ongoing dynasties who trace their lineage back to Interlaken's earliest daredevils. Two in particular, a brother and a sister, lost their mother while she was free-climbing on the Mordwand. Instead of running away, the siblings remain inexorably drawn to the mountain, fearlessly snowboarding off-piste on Eiger's precipitous slopes.

Yuki herself hails from Japan, though she now calls the nearby town of Grindelwald home. A slender woman with unruly waves of dark hair, she barely comes up to my shoulder yet hauls her bulging backpack as if it weighs nothing. She's swished down powdery slopes from Niseko to Aspen with her husband and three kids, and climbed back up them with her bear of a Bernese mountain dog. For a wedding present, she received heliskiing tickets. The day before she met me, she ran Interlaken's infamous marathon—43 kilometers and more than a thousand meters of elevation climb over dirt alpine trails.

I ask her if it was tough and she shrugs. No big deal.

You've been eating the wrong fondue. It's cool, I didn't know any better either. The simple fact of the matter is that this glorious cauldron of molten dairy is a different beast in its native land. It's richer, creamier and boozy enough to induce a swoon. As a waiter one evening tells me in his haughty Parisian accent, "I am from France, yes? But even in France, I do not order fondue because it is crap. Once you have had the real Swiss fondue, all others are crap."

It all comes down to the ingredients, the list of which is succinct and fiercely debated. Wild mushrooms, tomato sauce, chilies, heavy cream, truffles and various liquors may be added, but in its purest

form, this dish consists of two cheeses, a dry white and a whisper of garlic. Most outsiders are familiar with *neuchâteloise*, that classic blend of Gruyère and Emmental, but during my journey I become a fast convert to the *moitié-moitié* way of doing things. By swapping out Emmental for unctuous Fribourg Vacherin, a mountain cheese with hints of the wild flowers, this elemental dish reaches a nearly transcendent state.

It's also rather, well, odiferous, shall we say, which is why more than a few restaurants in Interlaken insist that aficionados savor their fondue al fresco. On golden autumnal days, the streets line up with hikers fueling up on hearty Swiss fare. They dine on slabs of raclette garnished with cornichons to live piano at the grand old Café Schuh or head to the trendier OX Restaurant & Grill for locally raised steaks served with miniature cast iron skillets of rösti. The well-heeled frequent The Victoria Jungfrau Grand Hotel & Spa for high tea. The place was a bastion of luxury long before the rest of the town mushroomed into an alpine hot spot and it still bears the gracious British-style service it has maintained for generations.

All of my meals on the ground, delicious though they may have been, could never quite equal the one at the end of my train journey to Jungfrauoch. At the end of more than two hours of near-continuous climbing, of being propelled through the dark heart of the Eiger, Yuki and I emerge into an unreal world of endless winter. After several silent, stunned minutes of inhaling brittle, frigid air and struggling to completely absorb one of the world's greatest panoramas, we head inside.

We cross through the Ice Palace, a tunnel 30 meters through the glacier where translucent sculptures of eagles and bears watch passing visitors. We hurry through to Crystal Restaurant and snag one of the coveted window seats.

Maybe it's the lack of oxygen, or maybe it's the shot of surprisingly smooth glacial whiskey—aged in barrels up in Jungfrau's icy passageways—but after a few minutes, I'm feeling woozy. The white landscape outside softens and takes on an even more surreal quality.

Yuki can see me staring, slack-jawed, at the scene she passes by almost daily. She understands.

"You see what I mean? Once you've lived here, it's hard to live anywhere else. How do you give this up?" she asks softly.

Captain Phil is disappointed in me.

"I can't believe you're not going canyoning," he says, shaking his scruffy, bearded face. He reaches over the side of the boat with a plastic cup, scoops up some lake water and passes it to me to drink. I'm no longer surprised that it tastes better than anything I ever sipped from a bottle. "The canyoning here is unbelievable."

The problem is, so are too many other things. Visitors are spoiled for choice. It's easy to see how so many end up staying on months or years after they had planned to leave.

At the moment, I'm sitting in a motor boat on Lake Brienz, gazing at a the 500-meter waterfalls and thickly forested shores. In a few days, I've trekked to Kleine Scheidegg at the foot of Eiger's North Wall; I've taken in the scenery from up on Harder Kulm; I've wandered the medieval streets of the nearby city of Thun. Yet it's still not enough.

"Don't worry. You'll make it next time. There's always a next time. People come back, or they just stay, like me," my captain says, as he prepares to head back to town. Looking up at the Ogre, Monk and Virgin, I don't need to ask why. +



T+L Guide

STAY

Metropole Hotel Interlaken The only high-rise in the area with impressive views of the mountains. *Höheweg 37, Interlaken; 41-33/828-6666; metropole-interlaken.ch; doubles from CHF109.*

Victoria Jungfrau Grand Hotel & Spa Interlaken's original grande dame still sports colonial opulence. *Höheweg 41, Interlaken; 41-33/828-2828; victoria-jungfrau.ch; doubles from CHF382.*

EAT

OX Restaurant & Grill Am Marktplatz, Interlaken; 41-33/828-1220; ox-interlaken.ch; dinner for two CHF70.

Restaurant Taverne *Höheweg 74, Interlaken; 41-33/826-6868; hotelinterlaken.ch; dinner for two CHF80.*

Café Schuh Don't be dissuaded by the international scope of this menu, which includes

Lebanese and Thai dishes—it serves one of the best fondues in town. Dinners in the evening are accompanied by live piano music. *Höheweg 56, 3800 Interlaken; 41-33/888-8050; schuh-interlaken.ch; dinner for two CHF60.*

Hüsi Bierhaus Popular craft brew house with more than 50 lagers, ales and ciders, including 12 on tap. *Postgasse 3, Interlaken; 41-33/823-2332; huesi-interlaken.ch; drinks for two CHF13.*

Crystal Restaurant *Jungfrauoch; 41-33/828-7888; gletscherrestaurant.ch; dinner for two CHF80.*

SEE + DO

Jetboat Interlaken *Rugenparkstrasse 11, Interlaken; 41-78/845-5699; jetboat.ch; individual boat tours from CHF99 per person.*

Star Paragliding *Höhenmatte, 3800 Sundlauenen; 41-79/354-5251; flystar.ch; tandem flights from CHF170.*

MAYBE IT'S THE
LACK OF OXYGEN OR
THE SHOT OF GLACIAL
WHISKEY, BUT I'M
FEELING WOOLY

